# Local Historian Publishes New Book on McDowell Family

**By: Dale C. Maley**
**For: Fairbury Blade newspaper**
**Date: March 12, 2019**

Back in August of 2018, Dale Maley hosted a group of visitors from Fairbury, Nebraska. At that time, he was aware that Judge Woodford G. McDowell had traveled from Fairbury, Illinois to Nebraska to establish a new town. He named this town Fairbury, Nebraska, after his hometown back in Illinois.

Other than this fact, Maley did not know any more about the McDowell family. This prompted him to research the family thoroughly. He used this research to write his new Fairbury history book titled ***The McDowell Family of Fairbury, Illinois***.

James McDowell had nine children. Three of these children's families came to Avoca Township, north of Fairbury. The first McDowell arrived in 1832, just three years after Major Darnall arrived in 1929. The McDowell's were among the early settlers to the Fairbury area.

Descendants of those three McDowell children who came to this area helped to establish six different cities. These cities include Avoca, McDowell, Fairbury, Gibson City, Pontiac, and Fairbury, Nebraska.

Since the McDowells first settled in Avoca Township, they helped to establish three cities near their farms. These included Avoca, McDowell, and Fairbury. Avoca is now a ghost town, with only the cemetery remaining.

Moses K. McDowell and his brother Frank moved from Fairbury to Gibson City in 1873. They were in the meat market business. They became upstanding citizens and helped Gibson City grow into a prosperous town.

Mary E. McDowell married Samuel C. Ladd. He was one of the pioneering citizens of Pontiac. Both Ladd Street and Ladd School in Pontiac are named after him.

The most famous and most accomplished McDowell was Judge Woodford G. McDowell (1818-1904). He was a self-taught lawyer, like Abraham Lincoln. Another Livingston County Judge admitted him to the bar. Woodford ran for office and became a Livingston County Judge. He was also an astute businessman and real estate developer.

Judge Woodford G. McDowell arrived very early to the Fairbury area. He saw what happened when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad came through in 1857. The new town of Fairbury caused the value of farmland to skyrocket when it was converted to city residential building lots. The village of Avoca immediately shut down, and many of the houses were moved to Fairbury. Judge McDowell also saw how Pontiac prospered when the railroad came through, and it was designated a county seat.

Judge McDowell decided that he could make a lot of money if he could find another location where a new railroad was going to be laid. He could buy the farmland at low prices and then sell it at high prices in his new town. The real estate would become even more valuable if his new town could be designated as a county seat, like Pontiac.

So Judge McDowell went to Nebraska with his brother and tried to find a spot for a new town where the railroad would come through. He also wanted to make sure that no other cities were around, so his new town would be designated the county seat. He purchased farmland where he thought his future new town would be located.

Judge McDowell guessed correctly where the new railroad would be laid. He also guessed correctly that his new town would become the county seat. As a result, he made a fortune from the formation of his new city, Fairbury, Nebraska.

Some of the McDowell descendants have been very generous to Fairbury. Floyd Stafford married Marion McDowell. They donated many things in Fairbury including the Floyd and Marion Stafford Pool, North Park, and the Echoes Museum.

Some of the McDowells were Fairbury bankers. The G.Y. McDowell bank safe still exists and is being used by Alexander Lumber in their Fairbury location. Several homes built by the McDowells in Fairbury are still standing.

Several descendants of the McDowell family provided Maley with some extremely rare photographs to use in the new book. These rare photos include one of the Avoca churches and a wooden bridge. Family photographs were also provided to be used in the book.

This research project turned out to be a fascinating story. It covers the McDowells as pioneering farmers to the Fairbury area. It also includes their role in founding the towns of Avoca, McDowell, Fairbury, Pontiac, Gibson City, and Fairbury, Nebraska. The McDowell family generosity has given Fairbury the Floyd and Marion Stafford Pool, North Park, and the Echoes Museum.

Maley donated printed copies of his new book to the Dominy Memorial Library, the Echoes Museum, and the Pontiac Library. Printed copies of the book can be purchased at the Walton Centre in Fairbury. Electronic Kindle copies or conventional paper books can also be purchased from Amazon.

# The McDowell Family of Fairbury, Illinois

Dale Maley